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current research

PRIESTS VS. NAZIS IN THE DIOCESE OF LIMBURG, 1934

THE CONFESSIONAL FACTOR

In 1934, the SD Oberabschnitt Rhein, a subdivision of the SS's intelligence organization (the Sicherheitsdienst or SD), prepared a series of reports on Catholic clerics who had criticized or in some other manner offended the Nazi regime. There are 174 secular priests on these lists, 23 of them from the diocese of Limburg. (1)

A statistical analysis was undertaken of the 83 priests of four of the dioceses represented on the police lists (Aachen, Cologne, Trier and Limburg), as these four dioceses are served by excellent handbooks which list for each secular priest the date of birth, date of ordination, date promoted (if a Pfarrer, e.g., pastor), and each post held, with dates. (2) The handbooks also list the priests who died since the appearance of the last handbook. In the portion of the handbook dealing with the parishes, handbooks of these four dioceses report also the number of Catholics and Protestants in the parish area, an important piece of data, as it has turned out.

Control groups were randomly selected from the handbooks in numbers to match the groups of "offenders" of each diocese. The overall results of the comparison of the "offending" and "non-offending" groups on a number of variables produced few pronounced indications of differences between the groups beyond a significant difference in mean age (the offenders are older, 48.4 vs. 44.2, p. .05) (Table 1), although the existence of greater number of pastors among the offenders largely accounts for that (Table 2), (Table 3); and the mean number of Protestants appears to be greater in the parishes of non-offending pastors than in those of offending ones (Table 3). That difference cannot be regarded as statistically significant, however, as the variances are far too disparate to satisfy the assumption of equality (Table 5). The chief contributor to the observed difference is the diocese of Limburg, where differences of massive proportions are observed (Table 6). (3) As much rests on the contribution of the diocese of Limburg to these figures, the next step in the investigation of the problem was a statistical analysis of the quantifiable characteristics of the priests of the diocese of Limburg.

II

The diocese of Limburg is bounded on the West by the Rhine, and on the Southwest by the Rhine for that part of its course where the river turns sharply to the west for some miles. The rest of the Southern boundary is formed by the Main River. Frankfurt is inside the boundary to the extreme Southeast. The city of Limburg, the episcopal see,

is situated near the center of the diocese. The largest Rhineland city in the diocese is Koblenz. While the Rhineland is predominantly Catholic, the state of Hesse to the east is predominantly Protestant. The Diocese of Limburg is in a transition zone between the Confessions. There is some reason to believe that in religious composition Limburg diocese in 1934 may have been representative of the religious composition of Germany at that time. If that is so, the findings concerning the diocese of Limburg could predict the direction of findings for the whole of Germany. If so, it is worth finding out what a study of the diocese may tell us.

Clearly the diocese is in some ways unique, however. The man who was its bishop in 1934, Antonius Hilfrich, was an especial annoyance to the Nazis. Quite unlike those bishops who ordered their priests to be silent on "political" matters (and in at least one case transferred a cleric who got into trouble with the authorities) (4), bishop Antonius himself seemed to be in the forefront of the offenders, and the Sicherheitsdienst looked upon Limburg am Lahn as a center of the "Black Reaction". (5) Over the years the diocese was to provide large numbers of offenders against the Nazi regime. (6)

Assuming that the population of offenders taken from the 1934 SD lists is a true population, and not a biased sample of some sort, the problem of unequal variances can be overcome by comparing it with the entire population of non-offenders. This massive task of coding was undertaken for the diocese of Limburg as of 1934. (7)

The two populations differ in a number of respects. A higher percentage of the offending population holds pastoral rank (69 %) than does the non-offending population (54 %) (Table 7). The age of curates is about the same in the two groups but the non-offending curates have been longer at curate rank (Table 8). Pastors differ in several respects between the two groups. The mean age of offending pastors is more than five years higher, offenders spent less time as curate and were promoted at a younger age. Offenders have been at pastoral rank much longer as a result of early promotion and their more advanced age at the time of their (1934) offenses. The non-offenders are generally in larger parishes, suggesting urban areas, and the number of non-Catholics in those parishes is much higher, also suggesting urban areas (Table 9).

The pattern of early promotion and consequent longer service as pastor has not shown up in studies using samples from other dioceses. Therefore generalizations based on Limburg diocese rest on a situation known in some respects to be unique. In any case, in this instance the mean number of Protestants in the parishes of offenders is far smaller than in the case of non-offenders. The difference clearly is a real one and not based on sampling error, as populations are directed involved. Sampling error is ruled out as an explanation for the Limburg findings.

There are other considerations which must be taken into account. It is possible that there is error on the side of the listed priests of the diocese of Limburg, and that they are not representative of offending priests in Germany, but share some peculiarity of history or geography which is unique to themselves. That possibility is not ruled out by this study, but it should be met at this stage of research by

a series of further studies of this and other lists to see whether Limburg does or does not represent a microcosm of the whole of Germany.

There is also the possibility that the conditions which favored offending in 1934 might be different than in later years. That is quite likely, but, again, only further studies can determine that. Further refinements should be sought by subsequent more massive studies. There already exists a list of offenders for the diocese of Limburg which is much larger than the list for Limburg used here (81 vs. 23) and which overlaps with the SD list on only three names. (8) But as the date of offense is not recorded, it is not yet possible to test for parish composition in the case of these offenders as the religious composition depends upon date (i.e., a pastor may have changed parishes one or more times in the period 1933-1945, each parish having a different composition). Neither is it possible to test for age differences without the date of the offense. (9) It is therefore vitally important that in drawing up future lists researchers should, wherever possible, ascertain and record the dates of the offenses. Otherwise valuable data will be lost to analysis.

III

The example of Limburg may indicate that Catholic pastors were more likely to be guarded in their statements against the Nazis where there were greater numbers of Protestants in their areas. The matter needs further statistical examination, but it is not too early to advance tentative explanatory hypotheses at this time.

Catholics in Germany have been accused of holding on, long after external justification, to a possible recurrence of the state persecution inflicted on them during the time of Bismarck's Kulturkampf. Many contemporary Germans, both Catholic and Protestant, regard this as having been an unfortunate and regrettable attitude, largely unjustified by the facts. Yet Catholics did suffer disadvantages in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The educational "gap" with Protestants probably owes more to Catholicism's base in rural areas than to discrimination (10), but there was some of the latter. Although Catholics made up about one third of the population of the state of Prussia, that state's predominantly Catholic Rhine province had no Oberpräsident of that faith during the nineteenth century. The only Catholic employed in the Prussian Interior Ministry was an office boy. (11) Catholics had some reason to feel at a disadvantage in the new Germany.

The "fortress" mentality which led Catholics to cling to their own political party and a host of religious organizations, helped, along with the warnings and condemnations issued by their bishops, to insulate Catholics from the Nazi appeal. Conrad Gröber, the archbishop of Freiburg, was of all the German Catholic bishops perhaps the most optimistic about the possibility of reaching some sort of modus vivendi with the Nazis. His early enthusiasms, in fact, won him the nickname "Brown Conrad". Nevertheless, he was more suspicious of the regime than the nickname implies (12) and nothing shows more clearly both his mistaken understanding of Nazism and his fear of Protestant machinations than a letter of March 18, 1933 to the Vatican cardinal

secretary of state, Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli (the later Pope Pius XII.). (13)

In this letter Gröber observed that in his diocese purely Catholic parishes were now going over to the new party "with banners waving". Should the Nazis not come through on their promises, however, there would be a reaction. The German bishops, he thought, should keep some distance, "without enmity, to be sure", so that in case of such a reaction the Church would not have to do penance for its fraternization with the Nazis.

Everything now hinged upon whether the Catholic leaders within National Socialism could maintain their influence or whether they would have to yield to "the 'kulturkämpferische' elements, who wished to proceed against the Black International (i.e., Catholic Church) in the most radical fashion".

It is this especially which constitutes the difference between German National Socialism and Italian Fascism. Italy, God be praised, is still a land united in its faith, while (in Germany) Protestantism uses every political opportunity to express its hatred for the Catholic Church and its desire to annihilate her. Although I am, on the whole, optimistic, I am nonetheless counting on the distinct probability that we will again, at least temporarily, enter into a severe period of Kulturkampf.

Gröber's evaluation of the relationship between Protestantism and Nazism is badly distorted both because he wildly overestimates the Protestant animus and vastly underestimates Nazism's own anti-religious inner dynamic. But his perception of the menace of Protestantism is worth noting, and if that perception was shared in any degree by ordinary parish priests, it makes more understandable why a Catholic pastor in an area where there were higher numbers of Protestants might be inclined to exercise more political prudence. There is also the possibility that such prudence may have been justified. For, the fact that Hitler was born a Catholic, that the Nazi party originated in the predominantly Catholic state of Bavaria, along with the favorable impression left by the heroism of the Protestants who organized as the Confessing Church and the negative impression left by Rolf Hochhuth's play 'The Deputy', may have tended to obscure the obvious, i.e., that Nazism's vaulting to the status of a mass movement was probably largely a phenomenon involving Protestants.

Such at least seems to be indicated by the election figures. From 1928 to 1932, when Nazism's vote soared from 2.6 percent of the total to 37.3 percent, the Catholic Center party held its own and even bettered its proportion of the vote. (14) According to Lipset the bourgeois parties meanwhile lost nearly eighty percent of their vote, apparently to the Nazis, dropping in the proportion of the total vote from a quarter to under three percent. (15) As the Center held (16), the massive increase in Nazi support must of necessity have come predominantly from Protestants. If even a measure of the anti-Catholic animus which Grober attributed to Protestants had any basis in reality, that hostility would have been potentiated, in Protestants who now became Nazis, by National Socialism's own animosity toward all things in any way international, or "foreign", and by Nazism's claims to the total control of social life.

This is, of course, speculation. While it may be inferred that in the early days of the regime there was a relationship between religious affiliation and support of Nazism, that cannot be established solely by this study, nor can intervening variables be ruled out. Nor can the causes of non-action (silence) ever be conclusively established. But it can be stated that in the diocese of Limburg in 1934 the existence of a larger non-Catholic population in the parish area is associated with restraint on the part of the parish priest. It may be that that restraint was the result of a hostile ambiance created by National Socialism's having won supporters among the priest's Protestant neighbors.

There is a second possible explanation which could have to do more with religiosity than with politics. A sociological study of German Catholics and Protestants done during the late 1960's found that there was an interesting interaction between Catholic and Protestant population. (16) Measures were taken of people's interest in religion and in the church, and of intensity of belief and frequency of practice. The study indicated that where there were more Catholics than Protestants in an area, both groups were engaged more in religious practices. Religious activity of Protestants was higher in area where there were greater numbers of Catholics. The reverse situation was not true, however. A majority of Protestants in an area was not accompanied by increased Catholic fervor.

If these results can be inferred to have any meaning for the situation in Limburg diocese in 1934, it would mean that non-offending pastors of parishes where there resided larger numbers of Protestants may have been ministering to parishes lukewarm in religious intensity and practice. (18) Offenders, on the other hand, would have served parishes likely to be above average in religious intensity and activity.

This hypothesis might help to provide a possible explanation for the behavior of Catholic priests in 1934. We could infer that Catholic pastors, surrounded by a large Protestant population, would be ministering to parishes which would rank below the level of fervor that would be found in an area with a Protestant minority. The priest in such a parish might feel less inclined to strain the consciences of his flock by lashing out at the Nazi regime than a priest in a parish of high and active religiosity. (In fact, he might himself be less affected by religiosity.) In that way, the higher number of Protestants might be associated with lower Catholic religiosity, either directly or through some confounding variable such as urbanization, and that lesser intensity of Catholic fervor might have led to fewer conflicts with Nazi regime. In any case, there is enough evidence here to warrant further investigation into the apparent relationship.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 The reports are filmed on National Archives microfilm, microcopy T-175, roll 193. The report of June 5, listing 18 incidents involving 17 identified individuals is filmed on frames E2732631-69. The report of June 12, 1934, listing 13 incidents involving 13 individuals, is filmed on frames E2732909-33. The report of June 15, listing 71 incidents involving 71 individuals is filmed on frames E-2732819-908. The report of August 7 lists 29 incidents involving 25 individuals, and is filmed on frames E273544-87. The August 20 report, filmed on frames E2722378-405, lists 30 incidents involving 31 individuals. The report of September 26 listing 41 incidents involving 40 individuals is filmed on frames E273209-373. One hundred ninety-seven individual cases are mentioned, but of that number one individual is cited three times and nine are cited twice. Reducing by the number of double and triple counts, in all 186 clerics have been cited for offending behavior. Excluding the one nun mentioned, the three bishops, the six members of orders (Jesuits, Benedictines, Franciscans, etc.), and two teachers, the reports list 174 secular priests working in parishes. This study focuses on the 83 such secular priests in the diocese of Aachen, Trier, Limburg and Cologne.

For the purposes of this study the police lists are assumed to be complete and the listed offenders are treated as a population. It is likely that there were offenders who went unnoticed by the police, but if so, that would mean that the control group might also contain "offenders", making significance even more difficult to achieve. If significance were to be achieved, therefore, it would be in spite of the possible incompleteness of the list and contamination of the control group.

- 2 In general there are yearly (or biannual) Schematismen, published in each German diocese. The sources used here, although sometimes entitled Schematismus or Realschematismus are far more ample in their information than the smaller yearly Schematismen. These larger publications, which appear only once or twice a decade are sometimes more properly designated as Handbücher. They may run, in large dioceses such as Trier and Cologne, around a thousand pages in length. The handbooks used as principle sources in this study are the Realschematismus der Diözese Aachen 1933, the Schematismus der Diözese Limburg 1936, the Handbuch des Bistums Trier 1938, and Handbuch des Erzbistums Köln 1933.

The 1927 Limburg Schematismus possessed by the Library of Congress bears the imprint of the rubber stamp of the SD Abschnitt Rhein, which apparently had made appropriate use of the book before it eventually fell into the hands of United State authorities.

For further information on these sources see my Schematismen as Sources in the Study of German Social History, "Historical Methods, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Summer, 1979), pp. 137-138.

- 3 The 15 offending pastors of the Limburg diocese were matched with the 12 priests holding the rank of pastor who appeared in the non-offending randomly selected control group. The mean number of Protestants in the offender group's parishes was 927, in the non-offending 4582 (see Table 6).

- 4 One such case is cited in my "Young Priests' as Opponents: Factors Associated with Clerical Opposition to the Nazis in Bavaria, 1933", *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 65, No. 3 July 1979), pp. 406-407.
- 5 Some of the bishop's actions as reported in the police documents are related in my *Hitler Youth and Catholic Youth: A Study in Totalitarian Conquest, 1933-1936*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1971) p. 84.
- 6 The diocese of Limburg published a list of priests whom the Nazi regime punished in some way, ranging from death in a concentration camp through protective custody to simple fines. (Source: Dr. Hans Storto, "Verfolgungspolitik im III. Reich", six-page pamphlet, no place or date of publication indicated). The size of the list is surprising, eighty-one secular priests are listed and over one hundred members of orders. (Even so, the list includes only three of the priests whose names appear on the SD lists used in the present study.) All this in a diocese whose secular priests in 1935 numbered 451. See footnote 8 below.
- 7 The Limburg Schematismus of 1936 was coded in its entirety for those secular priests active in 1934 by my research assistant Mr. David Sam, a graduate student from Ghana now studying at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.
- 8 See footnote 6 above. The reason not all of the 1934 offenders appear on the Storto list is that the latter is a list of priests punished by the state. The SD list contain the names of many priests who came to the notice of the police but were not proceeded against. There is also a listing for the diocese of Paderborn: G. Baumjohann, "Weltpriester des Bistums Paderborn in der Auseinandersetzung mit dem Nationalsozialismus", in: P.-W. Scheele (ed.), *Paderborn Ecclesia*, Paderborn 1972, pp. 711-746.
- 9 At one point we purged the Limburg population of names which appeared on the Storto list. When the two groups were treated as samples, the level of significance on age was higher using the 1934 offenders and the total population than when using the SD listed priests and the population purged of the Storto offenders. If this has any meaning, it would suggest that offenders must be considered in their respective times and against the total group of non-offenders of the time. The offender of 1934 may be a different sort of person than the offender of, say 1940 and deleting later offenders from the non-offending comparison group in order to sharpen the differences seems not to work. All the more reason that the year of offense must be recorded, as it is an important variable and an integral part of a quantitative study of these offenders both in obvious, and apparently in more subtle ways. Year of offense, as a variable, may represent the historical context in which offending is taking place.
- 10 Ernst Christian Helmreich: *The German Churches Under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), pp. 447-450.
- 11 These examples came from Ronald J. Ross: *Beleaguered Tower: The Dilemma of Political Catholicism in Wilhelmine Germany* (Notre Dame,

Ind.,: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), pp. 10 and 21. Ross is wrong, however, (and I repeated his error in a review in German Studies Review, Feb. 1978), when he accuses the historian Friederick Meinecke of pronouncing Catholic history professors "a monstrosity". The remark was about Professuren (professorships) which Ross apparently read as Professoren.

- 12 The Sicherheitsdienst later came to regard him as one of the "malicious enemies of National Socialism". Walker, Hitler Youth and Catholic Youth, pp. 182-183; Jahresbericht 1938 des Sicherheitshauptamtes, in: Fredrich Zipfel, Kirchenkampf in Deutschland 1933-1945; Religionsverfolgung und Selbstbehauptung der Kirchen in der nationalsozialistischen Zeit (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co, 1965), Doc. 53, p. 463.
- 13 The letter is published in Bernhard Stasiewski (ed.), Akten Deutscher Bischöfe über die Lage der Kirchen, Band I, (Mainz: Matthias-Grunewald-Verlag, 1968), pp. 10-11. In the letter he goes on to note that many who had held true to the Center and the Catholic organisations were now either anxiously holding back or going over to the National Socialists, "not surprisingly, if one considers the coercive methods which National Socialism employs". This observation serves to remind us that if the sudden growth in the Nazi party from 1929 to 1932 owed much to an infusion of non-Catholics, after Hitler's appointment as chancellor the Catholic line was breached and many Catholics then sought either to accomodate to the new reality or were genuinely caught up in the enthusiasm of the times.

Table 1: Age at time of offense (all priests)

	Cases	Mean Age
Offenders	(83)	48.4
Non-offenders	(83)	44.2

Table 2: Age at time of offense by rank

	Offenders Cases		Non-offenders Cases	
Curates	(26)	34.1	(38)	34.1
Pastors	(57)	54.9	(45)	52.5
Totals	(83)		(83)	

Table 3: Priests by rank (four dioceses)

	Cases	Curates	Pastors
Offenders	(83)	26	57
Non-offenders	(83)	38	45
Totals	(166)	64	102

Table 4: Age when promoted to pastor (four dioceses)

	Cases	Mean age
Offenders	(57)	36.6
Non-offenders	(45)	36.7
Total	(102)	

Table 5: Protestants in parish area (pastors only)

Four dioceses

	Cases	Mean	Standard Deviation
Offenders	(57)	792	1606
Non-offenders	(45)	2028	4438

Table 6: Protestants in parish area (pastors only)

Four dioceses

	Cases	Mean	Standard deviation	Cases	Mean	Standard deviation
Aachen	(9)	44	56	(3)	71	95
Cologne	(11)	1609	1668	(15)	1887	3555
Limburg	(15)	927	1426	(12)	4582	7033
Trier	(22)	597	1222	(15)	518	1230
	(57)			(45)		

Table 7: Limburg diocese 1934

Secular priests of both

Pastoral and curate rank (populations)

	Offenders (23)	Non-offenders (286)
Mean age	49.0	44.5

Table 8: Limburg diocese 1934

Curates

	Offenders (8)	Non-offenders (116)
Mean Age	33.6	33.5
Years as curate	7.0	8.6

Table 9: Limburg diocese 1934
Pastors

	Offenders (15)	Non-offenders (170)
Mean Age	57.3	52
Years spent as Curate	12.6	13.8
Age Promoted to Pastor	35.7	38.6
Years as Pastor	20.4	13.3
Number of Catholics in Parish	1708	2399
Number of Non Catholics	787	3930

ANNEX

Limburg offenders of pastoral rank

Name	Location of Parish	Catholics	Protestants	Percentage Catholic
1. Hartmann, Ludger	Schmitten	839	2747	23
2. Hippacher, Martin	Niederwalluss	1086	469	70
3. Boehm, Friedrich von	Erbach	1808	40	98
4. Kilburg, Peter	Niederbrechen	2267	15	99
5. Kraus, Julius	Nievern	1703	424	80
6. Kunst, Damian	Bad Ems	3401	5092	40
7. Labonté, Christian	Johannisberg	1355	120	92
8. Luschberger, Josef	Montabaur	4038	751	85
9. Marx, Albert	Stierstadt	1150	1164	50
10. Reuss, Heinrich	Winkel	2438	201	92
11. Röhrung, Johannes	Niederzeuzheim	1711	13	99
12. Roos, Peter	Lorchhausen	761	4	99
13. Schroeder, Josef	Haussen-Fussingen	1240	3	100
14. Stemmler, Adolf	Oberweyer	697	3	100
15. Weckbecker, Karl	Hattenheim	1587	635	71

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